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# Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The study of cybercommunity is inevitably linked to the development of the internet amid other cultural phenomena, and cybercommunity as a cultural practice has clearly reached a point of critical mass. The concept of online community has become increasingly diluted as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly 'signify' community. This study grapples with the concept of community in cyberspace and suggests alternative ways of characterizing online social relations that avoid the vagaries of 'community'. Based on interviews and a theoretical consideration of online community, it finds that the metaphor of 'community' in cyberspace is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility. This study suggests a symbolic interactionist approach to the examination of online social relationships that is free of the controversy and structural-functional baggage of the term 'community'. It suggests that community is an evolving process, and that commitment is the truly desired social ideal in social interaction, whether online or offline.

## Key words

community • cyber community • cyberspace • internet  
• online community • social interaction • virtual community

## INTRODUCTION

Since the late 19th century, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and cultural prophets have kept the social quest for community in the limelight of popular discourse. This discourse scrutinizes the nature of community and its value within public culture. Numerous social observers (Sennett, 1977; Bellah et al., 1985; Rheingold, 1993; Barlow, 1995) have documented the perceived decay of communal life in post-industrial nations. Some of these observers extol the internet as a prospective site for capturing an ideal form of community in western nations. Generally, western citizens conceive of communities in the archetypal sense described by social theorists in the late 19th century: place-based social interaction, collective value systems, and shared symbol systems create a normative structure typified by organic traditions, collective rituals, fellowship and consensus building. To this end, community is a social palliative, idealized to the extent that it has become fetishized. But other theorists (Cohen 1985; Etzioni 1995) suggest a contemporary view of community that is less place based and more process oriented. For these scholars, community includes processes of social solidarity, material processes of production and consumption, law making and symbolic processes of collective experience and cultural meaning. The varied ideas about communal existence depict an evolutionary and dynamic construction of community that is globally relevant given the proliferation of online communication technology.

That dynamism is the focus of this article, which examines the concept of community in cyberspace and suggests alternative ways of characterizing online social relations that avoid the vagaries of 'community'. The idea of cybercommunity is compelling – to leave behind our bodies, and our prejudices and limitations associated with those bodies, to interact solely as minds in an unfettered environment. Perhaps this is why much scholarship addresses the nature of online community. This study will examine some theoretical assumptions about community, contextualize the scholarship on cybercommunity, present findings from interviews with online forum participants and suggest other conceptualizations of online social interaction as a means of paradigmatic progress regarding the narrative on cybercommunity. Building on Bennis and Slater's (1968) 'portable roots' metaphor of symbolic commitment, this study advocates a symbolic interactionist perspective on cybercommunity that focuses on the process of community building as an active human endeavor. It is hoped that these alternative conceptualizations will supplement the corpus of work on cybercommunity in a nuanced and constructive way that contributes to public understanding of, and dialogue about, community in western cultures.

## WHAT STUDIES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY REVEAL

Early studies of online community focus on the possibilities of territorialization – the internet as new social space. Many of these studies connect philosophically with urban sociologists in the conceptualization of community as type, as human ecology, as local network, and as economic conflict. For example, Benedikt (1991) asserts that virtual space is materially analogous to physical space in that it has geographic and physical properties. Rheingold (1993) contends that virtual communities perform the solidifying functions of traditional, pre-industrial community. Baym (1995) finds online groups with ‘richly developed cultures’ transforming the internet into a new communal space. According to Whittle (1997) the real power of virtual communities lies within our ability to create and build those communities, not merely to choose them. Miller (1996) agrees, arguing that, although advances in communication technology are often blamed for the destruction of community, online technology can be used to restore and strengthen the impulse of humanity to create and sustain community. Jones (1995) observes that any definition of online community must encompass spatial as well as social elements. Thus, Jones supports a robust conception of community that connects material/spatial customs with the transmission of social values and belief systems. Some social prognosticators offer a cautionary dismissal of cybercommunity. While Doheny-Farina (1996) offers a tentative acceptance of virtual community networking, he stresses that it cannot develop at the expense of physical communities. Miller (1996) conceives of virtual community as merely another capitalist venture that will guarantee ‘the same limited supply of short-term and superficial satisfactions that the market presently supplies’ (1996: 327).

As more studies of this nature proliferated, the concept of online community became a more accepted social construct. Studies encompassed discursive communities online (Reid, 1991; Howard, 1997); identity (Bromberg, 1996; Turkle, 1995; Baym, 1998; Donath, 1999); community as social reality (Watson, 1997; Kolko and Reid, 1998; Van Dijk, 1998; Baym, 2000); networking (Schuler, 1996; Wellman et al., 1996; Wellman, 1997; Horrigan et al., 2001); the public sphere (Ess, 1996; Fernback, 1997; Jankowski and van Selin, 2000). These studies demonstrate that online community is a significant social construct in terms of its culture, its structure and its political and economic character. Some recent studies of online community explore the nature of community in deeper ways, in terms of social trust (Gattiker et al., 2001); place-based ‘freenets’ (Silver, 2000); the internet paradox (Kraut et al., 1998); and global economic interactions (Castells, 2001; Stewart and Pileggi, forthcoming). This includes literature arguing against the romanticization of online community (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). It is not surprising that so much literature on virtual

community exists. In the tradition of scholarship involving the social uses of technology, new media and community research examines the apparent transformations of structures of social organization. Globally, in developed nations, new media are playing a role in these transformations. But the corpus of research on online community has not done enough to problematize community itself: do humans have an intrinsic need to form associative groups? How can communal association be dysfunctional? Has community been essentialized and theorized to the extent that it has become almost meaningless? The next section considers assumptions about community in new media studies.

## QUESTIONS OF COMMUNITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Jankowski (2002) explores scholarship investigating the relationship between community and new media, stating that:

‘it is safe to say that the concept of community is as central to present-day studies of the internet as it was during the earlier years of sociology. The main difference seems to be redirection of emphasis from geographic place to a feeling or sense of collectivity.’ (2002: 37).

Castells (2001) suggests that community in the internet era needs to be redefined. The new definition of community should be ‘de-emphasizing its cultural component . . . and de-linking its social existence from a single kind of material support’ (p. 127). These statements indicate an uneasiness with the assumptions being made about community and its place in new media scholarship. But it isn’t just the internet that has confounded scholarly ideas about community. Stacey (1974) proposes that the concept of community is ineffectual in sociological research because it cannot be adequately defined, and it is too normative. She suggests that the study of social relations is best served by examining institutional arrangements in geographic areas.

The term community has lost much of its meaning in western culture because the discourse about it tends to be totalizing. Community is a political, cultural, economic, and technical buzzword. Community is descriptive and prescriptive, local and global, spatially bound or boundaryless, public or private, organic or mechanical, intentional or accidental, purposive or aimless, oppressive or liberating, functional or dysfunctional. It can be a shared interest, shared kinship or shared space. It can be physical locality or collective interests or collective memory or crisis constituencies or marketing devices. In journalism, ‘community media’ are *au courant*, but the term is used to mean local media. In business, community is a marketing strategy – it is about audience demographics and market segmentation. Community has become an agent in consumption engineering; it is the lure to impel the consumption of some commodity through direct marketing efforts. In sociology, community has traditionally been functional in nature – it doesn’t account for ‘out’ of community, isolation, or social dysfunction. It is too

guided by social norms, not only in the geographical sense, but in the affective sense (as in 'a feeling of community'). Community can be gangs, terrorists, anarchists, or racists. The concept of community, online or offline, has become increasingly hollow as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly 'signify' community.

Nevertheless, scholarship on cybercommunity has provided groundwork for discussion of social relational structures in contemporary society. The study of online community is inevitably linked to the development of the internet amid other cultural phenomena, and cybercommunity as a cultural practice has reached a point of critical mass. As political discourse is imbued with the impulse toward community as well as the hyper-individualism of Libertarian ideology, a critique of the nature of community environments takes on greater cultural significance. The online realm is an important site for the analysis of this phenomenon. The distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual' has become much less useful as the internet is firmly ingrained in daily cultural existence. Papacharissi (2002) argues that, since online and offline interactions occur in a single social realm, the false real/virtual dichotomy blunts the interpretive power of new media and community research. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the complexities inherent in the study of online community. Data from the Pew internet and American Life Project (Horrigan et al., 2001) found that 84 percent of internet users (about 90 million Americans) had contacted an online group at some point in their internet use. The study characterizes internet communities as vibrant and supportive, qualities evident in activities such as church groups or neighborhood activism. But while they argue that 'something positive is afoot with respect to the internet and community life' (2001: 10), they also observe that, 'people's use of the internet to participate in organizations is not necessarily evidence of a revival of civic engagement, but it has clearly stimulated new associational activity' (2001: 10).

The Pew study claims that 'glocalization' is evident in cyberspace – people are expanding their social plane while also binding themselves more deeply to their local communities. Originally used as a marketing term in Japan, the term 'glocalization' speaks to the desire to normalize the realm of the global into the familiar terrain of the local (Robertson, 1992). Appropriated by Wellman (2002), the term means that all aspects of the social realm have moved from traditional conceptualizations of homogenous community (which Wellman terms 'little boxes') toward 'glocalized' networks (where households are connected globally and locally through sparsely linked networks) and further toward 'networked individualism' in which individuals become linked, thinly, and unmindful of spatial boundary. Thus, glocalization results from strong local connection and wide-ranging global interaction. Wellman's glocalization phenomenon is part of his conception of network

analysis, a constructive way of examining online social relationships without an a priori assumption of community. His network analysis is highly individualistic in nature:

this is a time for individuals and their networks, and not for groups. The proliferation of computer-supported social networks fosters changes in 'network capital': how people contact, interact, and obtain resources from each other. The broadly-embracing collectivity, nurturing and controlling, has become a fragmented, variegated and personalized social network. (2002: 2)

Wellman sees an evolution to the use of computer-communication networks toward loosely structured, interpersonal networking, rather than tight, bounded groups. The community metaphor is inappropriate for Wellman, since individuals in the same household can belong to different personal networks. This conception is purposive, however, and functional in nature. In spirit, Wellman's networked individualism lacks the sense of collectivity sought by Dewey (1927) or Etzioni (1995). Networked individualism downplays any culturally relevant collectivism or group activism initiated in online interactions. It is not the metaphorical online community of solid social bonds and commitment.

To scrutinize the metaphor of online community, the next section includes an analysis of in-depth interviews with participants in online groups. These interviews are included as a means to inform the theoretical analysis of online community. The subjects have experience in various online groups that they regard as 'communal' in nature, but the interview questions do not place the mantle of community onto online social relations in an attempt to understand the subjects' constructions of these online relations. Thus, the connections between community, online community, and social interaction that emerge from the interviews are the connections made by the *interviewees*. This study is guided by a symbolic interactionist framework to investigate the nature of social relationships formed in online groups. This paradigm provides a valuable means for understanding how the symbolic representations of community in online environments influence the participants' notions about communal interaction.

Symbolic interactionism highlights symbolic communication as a device of reality construction. Symbolic interactionism asserts that individual and material realities are constructed through a dynamic, communicative process. Blumer's (1969) interpretive domain of symbolic interactionism posits that humans act toward social stimuli based on meanings they hold about those stimuli. These meanings develop through social interaction, and people's interpretations mediate their understandings of their culture (Blumer, 1969; Musolf, 2003). Thus, the symbolic interactionist paradigm emphasizes human agency – our ability to actively construct meanings and act upon them – in

an enterprise that speaks to the study of community. Cohen's (1985) focus on community as symbolic meaning reflects this interactionist perspective.

Kreiling and Sims (1981) describe how symbolic interactionism arose as part of a new view of community that regards the self in terms of community culture. They claim that the work of Robert Park and other Chicago School symbolic interactionists is about the rediscovery or formation of new communities. The Chicago School symbolic interactionists authored various investigations of urban life, including studies of juvenile gangs, Chicago race riots and urban ethnic enclaves (Musolf, 2003). Park and other Chicago School sociologists sought to conceive human action as a result of the interplay between the self and social elements (Kreiling and Sims, 1981). Therefore, 'symbolic interactionism . . . might well be regarded as an intellectual account of the Progressives' images and conceptions of the ideal community' (1981: 14), whereby the theory expresses the cultural mythos and action of individual social groups. The symbolic interactionists, claim Kreiling and Sims (1981), endeavored to grasp the method of meaning construction through symbolic interpretation as a way to build community through consensus.

As the background for this study, Blumer's (1969) notion of symbolic interactionism maintains that: (1) humans act toward objects and events because of the meanings those objects possess; (2) meanings arise from social interaction; and (3) humans interpret the objects and events in their environments to generate meaning. The following section describes the process by which people interviewed about their online social activity create meanings about community through social interaction. Their ideas about community are formed, in part, through interactions in online forums in addition to those in their physical interactions. Consequently, interviewees act in their communities according to the meanings they derive about their environment, whether online or offline, from those interactions.

## METHOD

To understand the meanings of online 'community' for participants in virtual social spaces, 30 people with experience in online groups were interviewed in depth. The aim of the interviews was to document the experience of online social interaction for participants to understand how they characterize the nature of those interactions. To investigate the meanings these people derive from their interaction in online groups, a qualitative approach rooted in a symbolic interactionist perspective was employed (following Blumer, 1969). To assess the perceived realities of online social interaction, the members of these communities must be questioned to determine the salience of this form of social activity in their lives. Interpretive strategies gleaned mostly from anthropological studies were applied to elucidate findings.



Qualitative methods are suitable for examining the process of human meaning construction. Qualitative research attempts 'to understand the mechanisms of social processes, and to comprehend and explain why both actors and processes are as they are' note Vidich and Lyman (1994: 23). A symbolic interactionist perspective is useful in this effort since it claims that human actions are imbued with social meaning, and that people act in relation to the meanings they form about social phenomena. These meanings evolve as they are interpreted and reinterpreted through social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992). Thus, participants in online forums, according to a symbolic interactionist perspective, cultivate attitudes about community based on the meaning of community in their lives. Their understanding of community is influenced by their interactions in online and offline environments and by their interpretation of those interactions.

The sample of interviewees was drawn from several online groups that lacked a specific community-oriented charter. Since this study seeks to explore online contexts in which users engage in social relations that may *possibly* be categorized as community, interviewees were not solicited from online groups created with the intention of reproducing commonly received notions of community. Because those groups are self-conscious attempts at community, they are 'saturated' and are therefore not useful in the exploration of social aggregations that may or may not be communal in nature. Thus, the study of online groups such as community chat rooms may not lend evidence to this study since the inquiry focuses on *whether* participants consider social relations in cyberspace to be community. A sample including groups with an explicit community mission would yield the result of finding community a priori. Therefore, subjects were solicited from randomly chosen online groups (listservs and newsgroups) without a community-oriented vision. The groups included the following orienting subjects: Eastern philosophy, political philosophy, graduate studies in the humanities, US politics, general health, and homosexual issues. After participating in these groups for a period of six months, the author culled a pool of participants' names, and solicited, via email, answers to an open-ended questionnaire. Some interviewees agreed to be interviewed offline, in person. A total of 30 participants were interviewed in depth. The majority were from the US and the UK, but two participants were Canadian and one was German. All subjects had been online for at least six months, and all regularly participated in online group communication.

This study used a semi-standardized, open-ended interview technique described by Herman-Kinney and Verschaeve (2003). This procedure involves asking a list of prearranged questions, but it allows the interviewer to seek additional information from interviewees who are exceptionally responsive. This technique permits researcher flexibility while providing an increased comparability of responses, simplicity of data analysis and better data reliability

(Patton, 1990). The in-person interviews generally lasted two hours, and were audiotaped and later transcribed. Online interviews varied in length from three to 10 pages. Interview questions were organized into four sections: (1) information about use of online groups; (2) the extent to which subjects considered their virtual social interactions to be cybercommunity; (3) what meanings they gathered from interaction in virtual communities; and (4) how subjects' online and offline experiences were integrated. Participants interpret their own online experiences using their own lexicon, and from their own perspective.

Data consist of interviewees' responses to open-ended questions regarding online social interaction. Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) 'constant comparative' method, each transcript was reviewed several times to construct a systematic analysis. First, interviews are analyzed to identify overall themes; these themes are coded accordingly. Second, the themes are evaluated in accordance with the conceptual arguments sustaining the study. Third, the interviewees' words are interpreted in reference to a logical construct developed during the thematic coding process. This method permits the researcher to generate sound, consistent theoretical constructs while organizing data systematically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

## FINDINGS

The most significant finding of this research is that participants in online groups possess incongruous understandings of the character of online social relations. Their opinions about the nature of communal interaction online are rooted in meanings they construct about the value of community and from their interactions with others in their online and offline social spheres. Two identifiable themes emerged from the interviews, as reported in the following sections. All responses, unless otherwise noted, come from interviews conducted online.

### Online communication and public life

Asked to characterize their online social interaction and to describe online group interaction's impact (if any) on public life, most respondents demonstrate ambivalent attitudes about their online social experiences. A 19-year-old female who participates in several online spirituality forums finds people in her groups to be 'tolerant, inquisitive, and communicative'. She says:

I see [my online groups] as an example of what telecommunications could/should be used for. [W]e share ideas, learn about each other, and occasionally argue. It's grown into a small community of people who recognize and care about each other. The hostility common in other conferences isn't in existence.

Despite her characterization of her participation in online groups in these terms, when asked her opinion about some online citizens' claims that online

activity, like religion, can provide meaning in people's lives, she claims she doesn't find particular meaning in online groups:

I guess it's not true for me, but if [other people] find meaning online, good for them. Anything that enables people to communicate more is a good thing. I like the possibilities for greater understanding and less judgment based on surface values; but in the end, the Net isn't going to change people. People will simply change it.

Like most of the interviewees, this respondent uses the term 'community' to characterize her online social interactions, embracing the symbolic dimension of community, which exceeds its formalist nature. Nonetheless, her statements reveal opposing perspectives of online social activity pertaining to public life versus personal significance. Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes collective human agency, not just symbolic communication. This interviewee participates in collective communication and appears to support the idea of social action based in online 'communities,' but she balks at the notion that her online activity can have significant personal meaning. Her comments suggest that she may not equate her online communal experiences with other social institutions, like religion, which have deep social significance and cultural richness. For her, the character of online activity appears to be more sociocultural and less personal.

A 25-year-old female participating in numerous groups for three years reveals contradictory views about online communication's role in public life:

Online citizenship is another form of community. It can help build confidence and help us learn how to reach out to others and communicate better with them. It is used by many as a substitute for offline communities and friendships, which is unhealthy for the individual and unhealthy for offline society. But it can make a wonderful addition to life and an excellent tool for self-improvement.

For this respondent, online community is a symbolic confidence-booster, but a true investment in online community is socially undesirable. She continues, providing her opinion about whether online activity can provide meaning in people's lives:

I feel sad for someone whose life lacked meaning or was given additional meaning by getting online. The Net can help to meet people and it can be relaxing, entertaining and educational. But I don't see what meaning it could add to someone's life unless they are totally isolated from their offline community. In which case, they should use the Net as a step toward becoming a part of their communities and not as a substitute.

Despite her use of the term 'community', this interviewee views her online activity in terms of the one-on-one experiences and relationships she has cultivated. She appears to support the symbolic interactionist notion that

symbolic communication (online community) can be used as a form of purposeful social action. However, she claims that people cannot be active in a community without a sense of propinquity. Thus, true community is not divorced from its physical manifestation. She argues that seeking community in cyberspace is not an effective means for revitalizing the public sphere in contemporary society:

It would be better for people to break down the barriers of isolation within our own communities . . . The source of isolation and lack of public life is often fear. The Net offers protection to those who cannot work past the fear. There is ample reason for that fear to exist, but it is unhealthy for people to give into it completely and unhealthy for society . . . to seek the refuge . . . of the computer screen. 'Public life' will only become more dangerous and isolated if we do that. The Net can . . . enable an individual to participate in a 'public life' and break past feelings of isolation, but it is not a substitute for interaction with the flesh-and-blood people of offline communities.

Her observations reflect the idea that communities are physical entities. While online activity may spur social action, her ideas about community seem to coincide with Wellman's (2002) notion of 'networked individualism'. This conception of online interaction is limited, then, in its functioning as a form of community. Other statements indicate a similar notion that online social contact is disconnected from the public sphere of communal interaction. When asked to describe online group interaction's impact (if any) on public life, a 42-year-old male who operates several listservs reveals skepticism regarding the place of online communication in the public landscape:

The internet is rapidly turning into a commercial business. As one example, a discussion group I frequented was half spam and half thoughtful messages. Now it is exclusively spam (last time I looked there were NO more legitimate messages being sent). The Web is turning from small time personal publishing to big business – either sales or mass entertainment . . . On top of that, I personally don't find isolation and lack of public life in my personal life.

For this respondent, online social interaction has a commercial/functional character that does not contribute to a sense of community. The commercial nature of online activity precludes the internet, for this user, from having a useful place in public life. A symbolic interactionist interpretation of these comments demonstrates understandings of community that vary among users. Some speak of commitment to a community experience online but often contradict these declarations when asked specifically what their online interactions mean to them. The tenets of symbolic interactionism maintain that humans make choices, construct meanings and act based on those meanings. Despite some remarks that embrace the notion of community building online, the meaning of community for these respondents

is rooted in physical place. The online realm has limited utility, for them, in contributing to community and public life. Interviewees seem to separate online social relations from offline communal interaction. These understandings of online social relations and community are explored in greater depth in the next section.

### **The meaning of online activity as stereotype**

Asked to describe 'your feelings and opinions about the phenomenon of online group interaction' and to equate the 'quality of your offline and online social experiences', most respondents ascribed an ephemeral quality to their online communal relationships. Some, however, regarded online and offline social interaction as indistinguishable. A 44-year-old male participant claims: 'It's fun and I see it as no different from the offline aspects of my life'. These comments challenge the notions expressed earlier that online interaction, when viewed in communal terms, is separated from (and perhaps inferior to) offline social interaction. A 53-year-old male exhibits similar thoughts:

We once had geographic communities, then they became workplace communities, and then we were downsized or turned into consultants or otherwise split apart. There is little community of any kind now. The internet does fill a gap, as does talk radio.

But, when asked in an in-person interview whether online activity, like religion, can provide meaning in people's lives, a 30-year-old female respondent claims that people who find a sense of 'meaning' in their online groups need to 'get a life'. She asserts:

Some online citizens are pathetic and need to get a life. It's ok as a supplement, but if the net is all that gives meaning to your life then you have serious issues.

The responses that follow, prompted by the same question, demonstrate an eagerness to discuss 'meaning' in relation to online social activity but an unwillingness to ascribe a deep significance to their own online experiences. For most interviewees, online communal activity may provide some utility in public life for people with issues of shyness or isolation. They appear ardent to distance themselves from what they may perceive to be the stereotype of the introverted internet user.

The 42-year-old male respondent quoted above states: 'Sounds kind of sad – I'd be disappointed with life if online activity were even a minor way to provide meaning for my life.' A female respondent, 48, asserts that people don't find great meaning online 'if you had meaning in your life BEFORE you became involved in the internet'. But, she sees potential for online social interaction to be meaningful in public life:

At one time American society was very social. Today we don't even know our neighbor's name. Because of the frequent moving families do today, people simply don't have the 'roots' that they used to. They don't feel like they are a part of anything. Women used to have a solid support group that is no longer present.

This respondent echoes other interviewees who perceive the possibilities for internet communication to contribute to a vital public sphere, but she does not observe that same potential for her own life. A 33-year-old male participant values the opportunity to interact with others in a 'community of interest', that 'reinforces the global village idea', but claims that meaning in cyberspace is short-lived: 'that feeling fades to a more realistic perspective after the first 6 months or so'. Many respondents used terms such as lonely, sad, addicted and isolated to characterize the notion that some users find meaningful social interaction online.

Others are reflective about the meaning of, and commitment to, their online communities. A 52-year-old male active in online groups for more than six years says:

The online experience, initially, creates the illusion of involvement, of meaning, but as one matures in the experience, one begins to ask, 'What am I doing here? Does it have any real effect?' Just debating endlessly in some forum has little effect on the world outside. Offering some person support can make a difference. But meaning? Meaning is what we give or take in our interactions with others. Net interaction can stimulate thought . . . but I don't think meaning is inherent in the experience.

Other interviewees share these concerns, hinting that there is no personally meaningful symbolic community existing in cyberspace for them. A female college student says that most groups are 'a bunch of arguments' and that online citizenship is fun, but 'not very serious'. A 24-year-old male claims in an in-person interview that online interaction 'could provide meaning for some people, but I'm not sure it does for me'. He continues:

I can interact with a lot of people, which is important to me. But there's more to life. I couldn't live online because there isn't enough there for me. . . . It's kind of hard to have a virtual girlfriend. There's more depth of meaning in reaching out and touching the world. For the deeper questions of life, most of them are not answered online.

These ideas echo an idealized conception of community, but they exemplify the embrace of community as symbolic, surpassing its formalist nature, only to a limited extent. Although geographical or material conditions configure the formation of community in the physical world, people do grant symbolic meaning to their communities. This symbolic aspect of community highlights substance over form, and it clarifies the process of establishing the meaning of

community. For these interviewees, community means unity and support, but perhaps not true commitment. Few respondents indicate a sense of belonging, ownership, or investment in their online environments. Few perceive their online groups as Cohen's (1985) 'convenient symbols of their social selves'. Few would then agree with Cohen's emphasis of community as meaning over structure; rather, commitment holds more virtue as a social ideal for these respondents. Some respondents do seem to embrace the notion that communal meaning can reflect and shape one's identity; particularly, they distance themselves from the 'computer geek' stereotype of people who find community meaning online. In general, their statements indicate a lack of solid communal sentiment about their social relations online. While the sample of interviewees is small and ungeneralizable, these in-depth interviews permit an examination of substantive statements about how some users characterize their online social activities. From these statements, a symbolic interactionist perspective asserts that the meaning of community is diluted for these participants. Perhaps due to some of the reasons stated earlier in this essay, the term has become totalizing.

## DISCUSSION: DILUTED COMMUNITY

Traditional notions of community are not truly manifested within cyberspace for these participants. They question whether virtual communities have enough genuinely invested members to develop sacred customs, folk legends, and proud legacies in these spaces. Even intimate online communication is still being mediated by the computer and by the fact that the communicators are most likely strangers. Both the joy and the oppressiveness of that computer-mediated intimacy are tempered by the lack of human contact. The community metaphor placed on virtual social relations is inadequate and inappropriate. The metaphor is one of fellowship, respect and tolerance, but those qualities describe only a fraction of our culturally understood ideas about community.

The tensions between the actual social practices in online and offline communities are made more compelling by Jones's (1995) suggestion that online communities may have value only as a part of our private lives because they may not fulfill western society's craving for public community. Recognizing that contemporary community relations encompass both public and private, Bender (1978) argues, will create a culture able to quell the impulse to search for community in all social relations. Thus, claims Bender, we must realize the limits of community, including its oppressive potential, to embrace a public life free of unfulfilled nostalgic yearnings for social intimacy. According to Bender, we cannot achieve a true experience of community in our public lives alone, and citizens must learn to understand the changing nature of community to encompass private spaces.

But Dewey (1927) argues that community is built around what we have in common. Westerners generally have divisiveness in common; in our fragmented social landscape, collective interests are routinely balanced against individual rights, and individuality is pitted against the common good. This tension propels our society forward and keeps us from annihilating ourselves. Our culture is both unified and diverse and collectively and individually oriented; online technology expresses this dynamic and demonstrates how these tensions can be expressed in the metaphor of virtual community. The essence of community is the communicative process, and communication is the means by which shared perspectives bind members of a group together and help to define them as a community (Scherer, 1972). Thus, the 'community as communicative process' metaphor is alive and well in cyberspace.

But that metaphor is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility. Members speak of mutual respect and caring, but demur at the notion of true closeness that ideals of community evoke. Many interviewees cited oppressiveness as a concern in their virtual communities, and one respondent felt so stifled by his group that he eventually left it. Elements of continuity and sustained interaction tend to be rare in online groups. Based on these concerns, one might suspect that citizens of cybercommunities would not tolerate some of the behaviors (such as banishment or ostracization) associated with the intimacy they claim to want. As a society, we might examine how desirable that closeness is in an era of private sensibilities. Sennett (1977) has argued that Americans want to be 'left alone' in their private lives – left alone to contemplate the benefits and responsibilities of communal existence when convenient. The precarious balance between wanting to be left alone with our individual freedoms and wanting to find supportive intimacy of a communal nature endures as a theme of public debate. The enchantment with social interaction in cyberspace allows us to continue the debate without resolving it. Online social relations provide opportunities to explore new avenues of community building, but few have committed deeply enough to the endeavor to move beyond that metaphor of convenient togetherness without true responsibility.

So, rather than asking whether or not cybercommunity is or isn't real community, a long-term perspective on the cultural significance of cybercommunity focuses on how some users of online technology have created meaningful constructs of social interaction in the online arena. Thus, scholars will exploit further avenues for examining mediated culture and social structures. Symbolic interactionists, notably Chicago School scholar Robert Park, have recognized that people live life in multiple, overlapping spheres of social interaction and community; online interaction is one of those spheres. For now, the deepest significance of community remains in the everyday, non-mediated, physical interactions we have with one another.



## ALTERNATIVES TO THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY CONSTRUCT

What does it mean to contemplate community online? The concept of community as a social panacea has been weakened. The metaphor no longer holds the salience it once did, and is inadequate to characterize the panoply of social interactions, processes, and human sharing occurring in cyberspace. The nostalgic community metaphor verges on the tyrannical because, as an institution, community has no limits or checks; it is eternally sought and persistently encouraged. Although the interviewees herein use the term community to describe their online social interactions, they do so inconsistently and without the meaningful commitment characterizing *Gemeinschaft*-like social structures. But while *Gemeinschaft* ideals might remain rhetorically paramount, perhaps place is not as important as commitment in social organization. This is what Bennis and Slater (1968) alluded to in their concept of 'portable roots', a briefly introduced concept in the book *The Temporary Society*. In mobile societies, they argue, communal ideals such as continuity and commitment can be achieved through association with a job or church or other group that transcends physical place. Portable roots, then, represent a freedom from place but an embrace of commitment. Perhaps those interviewed in this study are seeking the commitment of portable roots but have found it to be limited in their online interactions.

What is useful in the study of online social relations includes the nuanced and multifaceted approaches of scholars unburdened by the community label, including the following examples. Network analysis is useful in understanding how users of computer networks forge individual relationships that are purposeful and less value-laden. Studies of place-based freenets promote an understanding of how online technology can foster (successfully or unsuccessfully) individual and group participation in democracy at a local level. This is a pragmatic perspective on community, characterized by locality rather than interests or symbols. Linguistic perspectives on social relations in cyberspace are valuable to consider since discourse and language are central to online communication. Discursive communities, described by Gurak (1997), are bound by common understandings of behaviors and meanings within a collective realm of action. Thus, discursively bound groups are not necessarily characterized by *Gemeinschaft*-like qualities, and can lead to instrumental groupings such as online learning collaboratives. Additionally, some businesses are recognizing the limits of the online community metaphor. If cyberspace itself is a product of a corporatized vision of global knowledge flows, then community is merely a form of capital – the data in online transactions. Noting that online communities were losing some of their vitality during the dotcom bubble – TheGlobe.com folded, Yahoo purchased GeoCities, and The Well was subsumed into Salon.com – Chisholm (2001) argues that 'community' was a successful marketing tool for online ventures that failed

to translate into bottom-line profits. Despite this revelation, one respondent to Chisholm's article in an online forum stated:

The problem with an online only community is that there is no true connection – the site is only a pool of info that many people come to visit. A true community takes people with existing common interests and allows them to form deeper relationships due to the communication advantages made possible by technology. The online community is a supplement to those real world connections, not a tool to replace them. (Cross, 2001)

This reader's comments demonstrate an awareness of the primacy of the communicative process in community formation. Community is not always about consensus or intimacy. It is about understanding that humans are bound together by a need to perpetuate society and culture. That need compels humans to work together and to communicate in a continual process of social maintenance or social change. This process is not always efficient or palpable; it can be chaotic and oppositional. Wellman (2002) contends that people have multidimensional social relationships – physical community, occupational community, and social community. Therefore, the practice of community is essentially a process of community. Dewey's idea of community as a derivative of communication emphasizes the dynamism of community. The process of community is about evolution and stability or about power and reciprocity. It accounts for the complexity of human relations without imposing 19th-century ideals of fellowship onto all productive social structures.

## CONCLUSION: ONLINE SOCIAL RELATIONS AS COMMITMENT

The spatial metaphor of community as opposed to symbolic 'communities of interest' seems a less useful dichotomy in the face of what is known about online community. Indeed, Robins (1999) suggests that virtual community is itself a socially regressive vision of technoculture desiring a world which does not exist. Like politicians nostalgic for a bygone era of civility and harmony that never was, Robins says 'virtual culture is a culture of experiential disengagement from the real world and its human condition of embodied (enworlded) experience and meaning' (1999: 166). He argues against the 'obsessive' characterization of geographic distance as tyrannical. Robins implies that online community offers an anti-social and anti-political view of the world:

Cyberspace, with its myriad of little consensual communities, is a place where you will go in order to find confirmation and endorsement of your identity. And social and political life can never be about confirmation and endorsement – it needs distances. (1999: 169)

This illusory closeness and intimacy fights against the very nature of adversarial democracy, he argues, and thus, online community is sentimental and anti-democratic. Despite what might be an overstated divergence between

the 'real' world and virtual culture, Robins offers a useful commentary about the complexity of social relations, both offline and online. Considering the potential oppressiveness of community in addition to its socially stabilizing potential, we must move beyond the nostalgic ideal of community. New media scholars must move beyond thinking about community as a product or an end unto itself. We must move beyond thinking about community as an online marketing strategy. We must move beyond the community metaphor as the paradigm of online social relations. Ultimately, this study suggests a symbolic interactionist approach to the examination of online social relationships that is free of the controversy and structural-functional baggage of the term community. According to this perspective, community is a mutable construct, determined by social actors who create meaning about it. This approach would recognize that online social structures are influenced by institutional relationships, power, nationalism, global information and capital flows, crisis management strategies, and other processes that construct our 'communal' practices. We enact community the way we've conceived of it. The meaning of community evolves as we devise new ways to employ it. People make networks into community even though networks may be more temporary than physical place. Therefore, motivation, as embodied in the portable roots concept, is the only permanent means toward commitment. And solidarity and commitment are different concepts. If scholars continue to paint internet studies with the broad brush of community, they dilute the potential of the research to understand how online communities are constituted, how they operate, how they are integrated into offline social life, or what they provide. Scholarship would benefit from a considered turn toward the nature of commitment in online social groups – how commitment is symbolically formed online; how commitment to online social relationships is manifested in everyday life; or to what extent the meaning of commitment to group is enacted in the online sphere. Moving beyond community as a paradigm of online studies is tantamount to moving beyond the 'effects' paradigm of mass communication studies. It is an acknowledgement of the rich findings of the past and future, as well as a commitment to other fruitful avenues of inquiry into this social phenomenon.

## Note

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, 16 October 2003, Toronto, Canada.

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